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EDU 402

Teaching and Starfish

Sometimes—when I’m on my sixth hour of doing homework, and I wonder if it’s all going to be worth it—I like to think about my future classroom. I picture my desk: organized and color coded, with everything in its place. I see huge windows with growing plants on their sills. I see shelves filled to the brim with all kinds of books that students can take home and read whenever they want. I see a cupboard filled with everything my students need: school supplies, healthy snacks, personal hygiene items, lists of all kinds of resources, and notes of encouragement. I see students taking whatever they need, whenever they need it; no questions asked. I see students’ work all over the walls and bright decorations with positive messages. I see students walking into my class who are genuinely excited to be there.

And it makes me really happy.

It’s not all about the physical classroom, of course. Being a teacher doesn’t start when you have your own perfectly decorated classroom to call your own. I think it begins when you have that first spark of a thought that this profession might be for you. For me, it started in high school. The unmatched dedication and verve that my English teachers displayed inspired me tremendously. They helped me overcome the challenges I

was facing in my life and led me develop an affinity for reading and writing. When I was in an English class, I wasn't overwhelmed; I was challenged. I felt the gears in my mind turning, making me stronger and smarter. I decided that I wanted to help future generations of high school students experience this same feeling by becoming a high school English teacher. To me, teaching English is about having students read, and in turn discover what they truly value and what they're passionate about. In addition, I think teaching English is about giving students a voice. Teaching someone to express themselves is an incredibly empowering act, and I think teenagers really benefit from developing this skill.

I want my classroom to be a place where students feel like their opinions are truly valued. I want to give my students lots of choices. I want them to have some say in how they want to display what they've learned. I want them to feel comfortable discussing controversial topics. I want them to learn how to formulate a strong argument so that they can fight for what they believe in. I want them to learn how to listen to other people and really *hear* them. I want them to learn how to really respectfully disagree with another person. I want my students to build meaningful connections with each other and with me as their teacher. I want them to know that I will always believe that they can succeed, and that I will do everything in my power that I can to help them achieve their full potential. I also want them to know that I'm a safe person that they can talk to if they are struggling.

I want my classes to be largely discussion based. I think that structured Socratic seminars work well. I plan on having students engage in debates. I plan on having students getting up and moving during class. I want students to draw and build. Come up to the board and draw this character. Build a diorama of this scene. Why do *you* think the author did that? Why does it matter that the character reacted that way? I want students to write often in class. I want to give them time to free write and try out new skills. I want students to blog. Above all, though, I want my students to help me create their class. Every year, I plan on having students take a survey. The survey will include questions about their personal interests, learning style, and prior knowledge, but it will also give them some choices about what units we study and what activities and assignments we do. By empowering students, we're not just showing them that we believe that they can make good choices. We are telling them that they are in charge of their education. We are telling them that they have a voice and that we hear them.

I think all teachers strive for their students to be intrinsically motivated to learn. A lot of teachers struggle to achieve that, though, and so they create intricate extrinsic reward systems in an attempt to get their students engaged in the learning process. I don't think students need rewards, I just think that they need their needs to be met. If a student seems to apathetic in your classroom, it's because they are going through something and their needs are not being met. It's very difficult for a teenager to communicate that they are feeling overwhelmed and frustrated, so instead they often shut down. This often

manifests itself in the student not completing assignments, not paying attention in class, and even acting inappropriately during class. If students feel safe and cared for in your classroom, they are much more likely to be able to put aside what goes on in their lives outside of school and learn. What's more, they will be more open to taking the risks that are essential for real learning. Students want to learn; they don't need any outside incentives. They do need support and compassion in order to help them overcome the barriers that inhibit them from learning. That's what teachers are for.

Technology integration is a hot topic in education. While some educators wholeheartedly embrace using various forms of technology in their classrooms, others think that it's grossly unnecessary, while many others' views fall somewhere in between these two extremes. In my opinion, it's all about balance. I think that it's awesome that many middle and high school students are now given their own laptops to use for the school year. It evens the playing field in some ways. Students no longer have to worry about not having access to a computer to get their assignments done. While access to computers provides a myriad of new and engaging educational opportunities, they can also be major distractions. Ideally, if students are working on their laptops in class, I want their screens to all be facing me. I know that sometimes, some students will inevitably be off task. All I can do is try my best to present them with activities that are fun and engaging and gently remind them to get back on task. Technology is revolutionizing entertainment and communication. We cannot simply refuse to integrate technology into

our classrooms. We must move towards the future with an open mind. We must be willing to encounter new challenges and figure out solutions. At the same time, as educators, we have dedicated ourselves to lifelong learning. There are so many phenomenal educational resources that the internet has to offer. We should be constantly searching for new things, trying them out, and becoming more adept at using emerging technology.

I'm planning on using a variety of informal formative assessments in my classroom. I've always believed that, in order for students to learn, they need to be able to practice their new skills and makes lots of mistakes without being penalized for it. Summative assessments will be project-based, and students will get some choice as to how they want to demonstrate their learning. Any rubrics I use will be created collaboratively with students. This process allows students to know exactly what they're aiming for before they begin working on their project and gives them a sense of autonomy.

Today's teenagers are especially concerned with learning information and skills that will be relevant to them in their adult lives. Therefore, my learning focus will be teaching students how to apply what they will learn in their high school English classes to their everyday lives. I want to teach them how to write a cover letter and create a resume, but I want them to learn how to express their emotions through poetry, too. I want them to write an essay, cut it up, and play around with their organization. I want them to

discuss, to question, to suppose, to go out on a limb. I want them to take risks and try new things. I want them to be able to think creatively, work collaboratively, and show empathy for all people. I want to help them find books that they love to read.

I would say that my two main philosophies are pragmatism and existentialism. In brief, pragmatists contend that change is a constant, whereas existentialists maintain that *nothing* is a constant, and that it is up to the individual to make meaning of their own life through their actions. So how will these philosophies impact my teaching? Well, I absolutely want to challenge my students. I'm particularly interested in having them face complex challenges that are relevant to their lives (i.e., How can you use rhetorical strategies on Facebook?). At the same time, I want students to learn how work collaboratively and think critically about precisely what they value and why they value it. Socrates once said: "Know thyself. The unexamined life is not worth living." I agree, and as a result I want to make my students comfortable with self reflection. Essentially, I want students to know that their lives will change more times than they can count, but that these changes are beautiful opportunities for fresh starts. I want my students to know that their time on this Earth is finite, and that it's up to them to choose to make every day personally meaningful.

Within the philosophy of existentialism, there are two theories: humanism and constructivism. Humanism is the theory that all people are inherently good, but that they are often negatively influenced by society. Comparably, constructivism is the belief that

learning empowers students to form their own unique perspectives. Each of these theories are student-centered. Both of these theories are part of my overall educational philosophy. As a teacher, I want to have my students participate in a wide variety of activities that will engage their minds in different ways. I don't think that there's a predetermined set of knowledge that students should learn. Instead, I think that learning is a personal journey, and while students should seek to be well-rounded, they should also cultivate skills that are particularly important to them. Artists should learn to do their taxes, but they should have plenty of time to make all kinds of art and learn about artists. What's more, I think that students are in charge of their education. I want to give my students plenty of choices about what they learn (i.e., Would you rather read *Hamlet*, *Titus Andronicus*, or *Macbeth*?) and how they learn it (i.e., You can make a short film, write an original song, create a poster, or write an essay). There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all education. Students have always known this, but now teachers are figuring it out, too.

Comenius was one of the first people who advocated for all people to be educated. He believed "in universal education for all, no matter what their social background, religion, sex, or intellectual ability". This has always been an essential part of my philosophy as an educator. Everyone is welcomed in my classroom. There is no reason that a person should not be allowed to pursue an education, and as teachers, it is our job to teach whomever wants to learn. We can never lose sight of the fact that we are

imparting knowledge every day. We are illuminating the lives of all of our students, little by little.

But sometimes, the light doesn't seem like it's shining very bright. Sometimes, teachers doubt that the light's there at all.

There's a story that I always think of in those moments. A young man was walking down the beach one day, when he turned a corner and saw thousands and thousands of starfish washed up on the beach. In the distance, he saw an older man picking up the creatures, one by one, and tossing them back into the ocean. The young man shouted, "Old man! Why are you throwing them back into the ocean? You'll never save all of them." The old man tossed another starfish into the sea and replied, "I saved that one." And he kept going.

This is a story that has come to be associated with the profession of teaching. The challenges educators face each day seem as insurmountable as saving thousands of starfish. But everyday, millions of teachers around the world wake up and continue to work with their students. They come in early, they stay late after the last bell. They give their students everything they have, and at the end of the day, they are content with knowing that they reached at least one of them. I've often worried that I'm not going to be a great teacher. In those times I tell myself that I will give my students all that I have to give, and that I make some sort of difference in one student's life, then all of my hard work will be well worth it.

There are thousands of starfish, but I have two hands to help them get to where they belong.